DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 491 JC 840 020

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TITLE Information Skills for the Information Age.
INSTITUTION Miami-Dade Community Coll., Fla.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Planning; Community Colleges; *Curriculum Development; *Educational Change; Educational Objectives; Education Work Relationship; *General Education; Program Evaluation; Two Year Colleges; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Writing Across the Curriculum

ABSTRACT

As America enters the information age, industry will require a more knowledgeable work force, many new occupations will be introduced and old ones eliminated, and the nature of each occupation will be evolutionary. Information skills -- finding information, reading it, analyzing it, interpreting it, applying it, and communicating it -- will become the most important occupational skills. The goal of Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) is to help every student, regardless of his/her program, to develop these skills and the next major step in the educational reform initiated at the college in 1978 will be to implement changes to reach this goal. Elements in this reform will include the following: (1) the annual performance objectives for academic staff will include an objective related to the improvement of students' information skills; (2) writing and reading objectives will become a part of each course's objectives; (3) writing expectations will be included in course outlines; (4) support will be provided to help faculty teach writing across the curriculum; (5) class size will be reduced to a mean of 22 students; (6) writing laboratories will be available on all campuses; (7) an additional English requirement will be added; (8) a mid-program student assessment will be initiated; (9) the rationale for these changes will be communicated to students; and (10) an evaluation program to assess student gains in information skills will be a high priority. (LAL)

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Information Skills for the Information Age

VC 840 020

by Robert H. McCabe
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Miami-Dade Community College continues to review our rapidly changing society in order to design an educational program that will match the needs of the Dade County population and our business and industry. In the information age, industry will require a knowledgeable work force, many new occupations will be introduced and the nature of each occupation will be evolutionary. Thus, in order to prosper, individuals must be skilled learners and proficient in information skills. Our goal will be to help every student, regardless of program, develop these skills. As the next major step in reform, this will be the fundamental emphasis of the Miami-Dade educational program.

WORK AND EDUCATION

As America enters the information age, the nature of work is changing rapidly. Virtually all jobs now require the ability to utilize and communicate information. Office occupations have expanded to more than fifty percent of all employment. The number of "better" positions in the semi-professional/technical area is growing, while the number of those classified as unskilled and semi-skilled is declining. This pattern is especially apparent as the nation emerges from the recent recession. The Kiplinger Washington Letter (July 22, 1983) illustrates the changing job situation, reporting that demand for specialists remained constant even through the recession, but as "help-wanted" ads increase, the demand is for skilled office personnel—word processors and competent secretaries, plus technicians in high technology fields such as computers, medical care and research. It is fair to conclude that academic (information) skills have become the most important occupational skills.

While the nature of work has been changing rapidly, American Education at all levels has suffered from a tragic reduction in the emphasis on the academic skills that are now more essential than ever. Standardized test scores vividly document the decline. Most worrisome is the 1981 report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which indicates a twenty percent decline in the percentage of seventeen-year-olds able to interpret reading matter satisfactorily. Data from Miami Dade Community College, consistent with that from similar institutions, indicate that a typical student writes only one or two papers in high school. Over the past two decades, writing has "leaked" out of the curriculum in higher education, as instructors became increasingly dependent on objective tests to evaluate student learning. To compound the problem, many faculty members are not adequately prepared to make writing an integral part of their courses—especially when their students are poor writers—and thus require extra support and assistance.

Miami-Dade Community College has an unusual situation—the native language of nearly half of the students is not English. Thus, many of these students have more academic distance to cover in order to gain strong information skills in English. On the other hand, Miami-Dade is in a unique position to graduate students with multi-lingual competencies that are so important to business and governmental operations of the late twentieth century.

It is ever more clear that information skills—finding information, reading it, analyzing it, interpreting it, applying it, and communicating it—are the foundation for living effectively and being employed productively in the information age. These skills are

prized by business, government, and academic institutions. As Ernest Boyer and Fred Hechinger point out in *Higher Education in the Nation's Service*, individuals who develop these information skills will have a special advantage in the future. So too, will there be an important economic advantage for those communities that develop a broad base of individuals with the required skills. Nowhere is this more the case than in Dade County, which was described in a recent Esquire (February 1983) article as a growing "processing center" with emphasis on international trade and banking. The ability to utilize and "process" information will be essential for employment, and the availability of a knowledgeable workforce the key to successful business enterprise and a progressive economy.

There are two other factors related to the increased complexity of work that should be mentioned. New occupations are being introduced, and old ones eliminated at an accelerating rate, and the nature of jobs is evolutionary. Thus, individuals must be skilled learners, so that they can stay current to continue to be effective in their occupation, or be prepared to learn the skills needed for transition to new occupations.

OPPORTUNITY WITH EXCELLENCE

Miami-Dade Community College has a firm commitment to providing programs to benefit the diversified population of Dade County. In 1978 the College began a comprehensive educational reform, with the goal of increasing quality while maintaining access. The program was designed to serve the wide range of students who attend the College, with special concern for the substantial number who are academically underprepared. All students must gain the skills necessary to become productive citizens of the community, and be prepared for the complex occupations of the information age. To achieve this goal, the reform program is more directive, supportive, and demanding. Encouraging research results show that progress is being made, and that is because of the dedicated work of our exceptional faculty and staff. National education authorities are closely following Miami-Dade's comprehensive reform, and view it as among the most important educational developments in the country.

EMPHASIS ON INFORMATION SKILLS

It would be easier for all if we could limit our work to continued accommodation of the massive program changes that have been made in the past five years However, review of the needs of our community lead to the conclusion that further major adjustment is necessary. The College will significantly adjust its educational program to place central emphasis on assisting each student to develop strong information skills. This means systematically increasing reading requirements and making writing an integral part of all courses. The ability to analyze, synthesize and evaluate data requires the ability to read critically, to conceptualize, to form basic conclusions, and to communicate such understanding in writing.

In effect, the College views the curriculum as serving two interrelated purposes: (1) General education and program-specific courses with objectives and content designed to prepare an individual for a career and to be a productive citizen; and, (2) the objective of assisting each student in development of information skills and competence as an independent learner is to be interwoven into every course offered by the College.

The goal is to graduate students who, in addition to career preparation, have mastered the process of learning and the successful application of information skills. Such graduates will be able to continue growing intellectually and be prepared to adapt to the changing occupations and expanding knowledge of the information age. They will be well prepared to prosper individually and to contribute to the future of our community.

Writing is of special importance in achieving this goal. The process of writing compositions is more than spelling, grammar, and syntax—it demands analysis and coherent synthesis; it requires critical thinking, and forms the basis for developing and refining the information skills which are the essence of academic and occupational pursuits. The use of writing in classroom assignments

and for course evaluations stresses logical reasoning as opposed to factual recall. Writing enables students to increase their cognitive skills, as well as to sharpen their analytical and expressive abilities, and helps instructors assess how well the students comprehend the subject matter. Thus, writing should be pervasive in the curriculum.

GOAL

The goal of Miami-Dade Community College is to provide an educational program which ensures that graduates have strong information skills and have mastered the process of learning. This requires increased reading and writing throughout the curriculum.

POLICY

All faculty share the responsibility for assisting students to improve their reading and writing skills by giving appropriate assignments, by reinforcing the importance of these skills, by pointing out deficiencies, and by directing students to faculty who can provide the assistance needed (General Education Program, 1978). Miami-Dade Community College requires substantial writing and reading in all credit courses (July, 1983).

1. The annual performance objectives for each member of the College's Academic staff—faculty, administrators, and support services personnel—shall include a specific objective related to the improvement of student information skills.
2. Writing and reading objectives will be included in the objectives of every course.
3. The course outline distributed to students at the beginning of every term will state the writing expectation for the course and the process for evaluating the students' writing.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

A. Further Education and Support for Faculty

As American higher education changed so that less writing was required, faculty competence in the assigning and evaluating of writing declined. In order to prepare faculty to emphasize writing throughout the curriculum, the College must undertake a program of support.

1. Courses and workshops for faculty, on the utilization of writing in their courses, will be offered on the campuses.
2. The support materials that have already been developed will be expanded, so that there is a complete "writing across the curriculum" resource book available to all faculty.

B. Class Size

The increased writing requirements have placed an additional burden on faculty, especially those teaching the required English and English as a Second Language courses. Funds provided by the State Legislature for program improvement will be used to reduce the mean class size in these courses to an end-of-term average of 22.

C. Other Program Support

1. Writing laboratories for students experiencing difficulty in writing or requiring assistance while taking the general education core courses will be made available on all campuses.
2. An additional required English course has been added for the Associate in Arts Degree.
3. A mid-program student assessment (Pre-CLAST*) has been added. Students who demonstrate need for improvement will be required to continue enrollment in courses stressing writing and reading development.
4. Each campus will develop direct operational support for faculty and students in addition to those services listed above.

COLLEGE GOALS AND FACULTY OBJECTIVES

The centerpice of the program is the requirement that all individuals in the academic decision-making chain—including the faculty, Campus Vice Presidents, the President, Deans, and Department Chairpersons—will incorporate into their annual performance objectives a specific objective concerning the writing curriculum. Beginning in 1983-84, all evaluations shall include an assessment of those objectives.

COMMUNICATION WITH STUDENTS

It is important that students understand why the information skills are receiving such emphasis therefore, the following steps will be taken:

1. A publication, entitled "The Miami-Dade Community College Educational Program," will be prepared for students to explain all of the elements of Miami-Dade's program, and why the College places such emphasis on reading and writing.
2. Where appropriate, messages will be included in the Academic Alert process and the Advisement and Graduation Information System, to reinforce this emphasis.
3. The College will increase its communication to prospective students about the emphasis on information skills and the need to improve their preparation for a program that requires strong academic skills.
4. At the beginning of each course, faculty will provide students with a written statement concerning course reading and writing requirements.

*CLAST is the Florida College Level Academic Skills Test of college sophomores. It was first administered in 1982. Beginning in the Fall of 1984, a specified score will be required for admission to upper division work in the State University System and for award of the Associate in Arts Degree in community colleges.

EVALUATION

An evaluation program concerning information skills will be developed as a high priority. Some of the components follow.

1. The statewide CLAST examination provides one convenient measure of academic skills. In the second administration of CLAST, Miami-Dade graduates' average score in computation was slightly above the state community college average; and in reading and in writing, the College averages were below the state community college averages. Problems related to English as a second language partially account for the lower scores for many students, particularly because of the time limitations for the tests. In spite of this complication, Miami-Dade is committed to work toward measurable improvement in performance on CLAST.

2. A survey will be developed concerning the College educational program, which will be administered annually to a sample of students taking the October administration of CLAST. The survey will be designed to determine student perceptions of the educational program, including the volume and effectiveness of reading and writing assignments. The first survey will provide base data on current practices. Future results will be compared to ascertain the degree of progress that is being made.

3. The College will continue follow-up studies of graduates in industry and in universities to determine the success of our graduates and the perceptions of employers and universities concerning the preparedness of the graduates.